



Universidad de Oviedo

Bruce Springsteen and the Cracks in the American Dream: War, Race, and Immigration

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*“Is a dream a lie if it don’t come true?
Or is it something worse?”*

“The River” (Springsteen 1980)

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1. Introduction

In his 1931 book *The Epic of America*, James Truslow Adams spoke of the U.S. as “a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone [...] regardless of fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (qtd. in Gale, 2016, p. 1). Although it was in Adams’s book that the expression “American Dream” was first used, this myth has been embedded in the ideals of the country even before its Independence. At the beginning, during the colonial period, the ideal of the American Dream was about the promotion from one social class to another. Later, after Independence, it was about achieving a better life despite one’s background. In the second half of the twentieth century, it was about owning a house in the suburbs and having a heteropatriarchal white family and a secure job. Nowadays, the American Dream is to a large extent about working hard to have a job that pays enough to afford sustaining one’s family and enjoying some of the commodities America offers. In conclusion, while the American Dream has evolved throughout history and everyone has their own interpretations of it, the notions of meritocracy and equal opportunity have always been present. However, the latter is just a myth, as not everyone has the same access to the means necessary to fulfill their Dreams.

The American Dream has some cracks, such as those suffered by working-class people, more specifically war veterans, people of color, and immigrants. These cracks have been the object of critique in political discourse, like Barack Obama’s, and in popular culture, among other areas. In this sense, pop singer Bruce Springsteen has been prominent in using his music as a means to denounce the injustices faced by blue-collar citizens, people of color, war veterans, and many other victims. Springsteen voices the concerns of these people, who all too often find themselves in a non-privileged position that prevents them from making their voices heard. Therefore, Springsteen’s music offers portrayals of the cracks in the American Dream suffered by these citizens, as well as of the role and response of the U.S. to their situation.

The American Dream has proved to not be equally available to everyone independent of class, gender, and race. In fact, research has proved that people of color, including immigrants, and working-class people normally struggle much more to realize their Dreams because of lack of fair opportunity. In this sense, blue-collar Americans were the most drafted social group during the Vietnam War as, unlike upper-class citizens, they were unable to

obtain exemptions. Moreover, when they returned to their country, their needs were continuously disregarded by their government. Therefore, not only were they unable to get the psychological need many of them needed, but they were also denied jobs. In this respect, it is blue-collar Americans that normally suffer the consequences of economic crises the most. Globalization has contributed to people from this class losing their jobs, and the American middle class continues to shrink as more Americans have fallen into lower socio-economic classes. As a result, the American Dream has become an unrealistic goal for them to achieve, as people in the lower social positions do not normally have access to the means necessary to do so.

It is also worth mentioning that people of color faced legal discrimination and segregation from the foundation of the country in 1776 until the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 60s. Nonetheless, having been granted the same rights as white citizens does not mean that they do not continue to experience inequality in many areas of their daily lives. For instance, the fact that they are excluded from many neighborhoods has limited the access of many non-white Americans to better-paid jobs or more prestigious schools. In addition, they tend to be the targets of racial profiling by the police, which often results in unfair prosecutions and even executions. Factors like these prevent people of color in the U.S. from realizing their American Dreams. Similarly, immigrants are often denied average and above-average jobs because of their condition, as they are seen as criminals or as people trying to steal employment from Americans. These immigrants are normally working-class people who are struggling so much that they are willing to leave everything behind to look for a better life and fulfill their American Dreams. Unfortunately, as a result of the bias they may face, these individuals are far from accomplishing their goals and sometimes may end up working illegally to earn a living.

As aforementioned, Springsteen's music is not only something to enjoy but also something worth studying. So culturally relevant are his effective storytelling, accurate portrayals, and critique of the American society throughout the years, that his music has been thoroughly analyzed by a wide variety of authors, especially in the U.S. Thus, as will be shown, there abound articles on Springsteen's portrayal of the effects of the Vietnam War in blue-collar America, as well as studies of his depictions of the racial injustices still present in the country. Moreover, there are prominent analyses of the singer's critique of how the

American working class tends to suffer the worst consequences of any challenge the U.S. faces.

The extensive bibliography on Springsteen also proves the relevance of popular music in cultural contexts. Popular music can effectively represent places, the identities of its citizens, and its culture(s), and it reaches a wider audience than other traditionally considered high-brow cultural works such as novels or poems. What is more, popular music has always been present in political campaigns in the United States, as it is known for encouraging engagement, persuasion, and public deliberation. In conclusion, popular music is absolutely relevant in cultural contexts because of its portrayals of the sociocultural conditions of a place at a certain time. In addition, popular music can also have an impact when it comes to cultivating an identity or generating criticism. As a result, it can influence people's behavior and feelings towards what is being denounced, as seen with Springsteen.

Therefore, the aim of my dissertation is to analyze and raise awareness of the cracks in the American Dream. While on the surface the American Dream may seem like a perfect ideal for anyone to fight for, it is important to be critical about the information we are given and realize that it is not as fair as we may think at first. In order to prove the existence of these cracks, I mainly rely on thirteen of Springsteen's songs (though occasionally other songs may be referred to) dealing with war, race and immigration as my primary sources, and on the aforementioned bibliography to support my thesis.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The American Dream

It is not unusual for America to be referred to as “the land of opportunities” or, more commonly, as the place where the “American Dream” may be achieved. In fact, “[t]he United States are considered by many as a country of great opportunities; the vision of the American Dream attracted and continues to attract immigrants like a powerful magnet” (Grzeszczyk, 2014, p. 39). The basis of the American Dream is the concept of meritocracy, according to which everyone has the opportunity to be successful in spite of their background, provided they work hard for it. Although the origins of the American Dream date back to even before the Independence of the United States from England in 1776, the concept has changed over time and is not necessarily the exact same for everyone. Still, the notions of meritocracy and equal opportunity to seek a better life have always been present.

In Colonial America the American Dream was accomplished through the interaction among classes; the Founding Fathers created a country where people could escape class restrictions and pursue the life they wanted despite the circumstances of their birth; westward expansion brought a race for land and living rugged lives on the frontier (Gale, 2016, p. 1). Whatever the time, when examining the American Dream there is a common denominator in all its representations: everyone is supposed to have the same opportunities to achieve a better life. However, as I aim to prove in this paper, this is not always necessarily the case. One of the clearest examples of this is that, during the period comprising the beginnings of the country up until the Civil Rights movement (1776-1960s), women and people of color were excluded from this equal access to opportunity. In this sense, American women were not allowed to vote in the U.S. until the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed in 1920, and people of color were not granted the same rights as whites until the 1950s-1960s.

The twentieth century brought the most changes to how the American Dream was viewed. In 1931, when the United States was mired in the Great Depression, historian and author James Truslow Adams spoke of the country as “a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement [...] regardless of fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (qtd. in Gale, 2016, p. 1), once again provided the person was white. Even World War II was seen as an

opportunity for Americans to show their national concept of idealism. The War gave a new significance to the American Dream, which for F.D. Roosevelt comprised “four essential freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear,” adding that “[p]eople who could feed their families, keep them safe, worship as they pleased, and say how they felt were living the American Dream” (Gale, 2016, p. 2). Nonetheless, once the war ended, the American Dream turned into a more materialistic concept “embodied in, and harnessed to, the production of a specific material artifact: the single-nuclear-family detached house in a suburb” (Archer, 2012, p. 11), which became “a status-mark by which others would know that those living inside had ‘made it’” (Archer, 2012, p. 11). Moreover, this new ideal “relied on people being able to afford all the modern accessories: cars, television sets, and college educations” (Gale, 2016, p. 2), making the American Dream depend on economic prosperity rather than on directly overcoming class barriers or fighting for freedoms.

The American Dream may be interpreted differently by different individuals. However, at no point does the way the American Dream has been conceptualized seek to reject the inequalities between the higher and lower classes. In fact, it focuses on the availability of equal opportunity for everyone to prosper: “Americans generally believe that even huge differences in the incomes of the rich and the poor are acceptable in so far as there are equal opportunities,” meaning the system works provided “everyone regardless of his or her class, race, religious beliefs or sex has the opportunity to become richer” (Grzeszczyk, 2014, p. 40). Unfortunately, most Americans these days view the American Dream as unattainable and unrealistic due to the lack of equal opportunity: “[t]he assumption that one can climb to the very top of the social ladder from its lowest rung during his or her lifetime is certainly not a goal which may be deemed realistic” (Lipset & Bendix, 1959, p. 278). Despite discrimination having been ruled illegal after the Civil Rights movement, racially segregated neighborhoods still exist as “whites, through a variety of exclusionary practices by white realtors and homeowners, have been successful in effectively limiting their entrance into many neighborhoods” (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 2). This has prevented many non-white Americans from having access to the better-paid jobs or the best education, proving the absence of equal opportunity to succeed. Furthermore, “blacks and dark-skinned Latinos are the targets of racial profiling by the police” which, in addition to a highly racially biased criminal court

system, “guarantees their overrepresentation among those arrested, prosecuted, incarcerated, and [...] executed” (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 2), making the American Dream harder to accomplish. Therefore, “contrary to popular belief about equal opportunities in the American society, family background considerably affects the chances of achieving economic success” (Sawhill, qtd. In Grzeszczyk, 2014, p. 45), which results in fewer options for people from certain backgrounds to fulfill the American Dream.

While it is true that the American society has been advancing towards equality, the American Dream is now perceived to be harder to fulfill than ever. This new difficulty is not only due to the injustices that are still present (racism, sexism, and ableism, among others), but also due to the shrinking of the middle class and an increase in the number of people belonging to lower classes. As a result, “the wealth gap between middle- and upper-income families increased sharply in the past thirty to forty years” (Gale, 2016, p. 3). It has been further argued that

[t]he American Dream has become something few can attain. Owning land [...] a home[,] [...] having a good life [are] no longer the dream. Instead, many people strive to own the most expensive vehicles, [...] homes, [...] clothes [...]. Under this definition, the American Dream can be possessed by only a few citizens. (Gale, 2016, p. 3)

In addition, globalization has caused the “disappearance of many lucrative places of work in American factories and their replacement by less lucrative places of work in the services sector, fusions and downsizing in corporations” (Grzeszczyk, 2014, p. 40), as it is more profitable for international companies to move their factories to the Global South. The reason for this is that labor costs are lower in those countries as there are fewer regulations regarding minimum wages, shift length, and health insurance. This often comes accompanied by fewer environmental regulations, resulting in deforestation, pollution, and the introduction of invasive species, among other concerns. Thus, it is not only the social context in the U.S. that makes the Dream harder to accomplish for some, but also current global economic trends.

Considering all the aforementioned circumstances, the American Dream is more typically perceived as a myth than a realistic goal for anyone to achieve. Nonetheless, the American Dream has been an essential part of American culture since the arrival of the first European colonizers. Based on the Bible and the tale of the Chosen People and the Promised Land, Puritan colonizers were very influential, as they introduced the American Dream and

its millenarian promise in the New World (Ruland & Bradbury, 1992, p. 9). In fact, this same myth has inspired the perception many immigrants have of the U.S. today, as they view it as the Promised Land where their lives will improve.

Contrary to what one would expect after so many years, the myth still “endures because it can be re-conceptualized and gives us hope” (Wyatt-Nichol, 2011, p. 259). For instance, in the 2008 presidential election, Barack Obama referred to the American Dream as “that promise that has always set this country apart,” that is, the promise “that through hard work and sacrifice, each of us can pursue our individual dreams but still come together as one American family, to ensure that the next generation can pursue their dreams as well” (Obama, 2008). With these words, Obama focuses on Americans coming together rather than on the more usual individualistic notion of the Dream. However, while Obama’s reframing transmits hope, the Dream’s implication that “any motivated individual can reach any social position, irrespective of their personal, ethnic or social background, including that of the highest office in the land” (Charteris-Black, 2011, p. 281) is inaccurate given the current socioeconomic context of the country. Through his music, Bruce Springsteen denounces social inequalities that prevent people from having equal opportunities to achieve the American Dream. In this sense, Springsteen brings attention to the fact that

the Dream [will] exceed the reach of too many [...] until [it] can be democratized. The gap between America’s inherent promise and the country’s historic performance demands closure [...]. If the gap remains, the country, Springsteen’s America, dedicates itself to the work still to be done. (Johnston, 2008, p. 210)

Among other issues, Springsteen’s social critique raises awareness of the struggles of veterans, non-whites, immigrants, and working-class individuals living in America and reminds the audience that “the American Dream [...] rests on a bedrock of failure, including death and dying, which Springsteen’s songs describe without admitting” (Johnston, 2008, p. 220). Even if the notion of the American Dream highlights equal opportunity, the situation in the U.S. reveals that “such barriers to social advancement as race or ethnicity, gender or the fact of growing up in a poor neighborhood, challenge the [idea that] the USA is a meritocratic country with an open social structure” (Grzeszczyk, 2014, p. 42). It is this hopelessness surrounding the attainability of the American Dream that leaves Springsteen

wondering “what if life, at its best, necessarily produces casualties, victims and walking wounded?” (Johnston, 2008, p. 210).

2.2 Relevance of Popular Music in Cultural Contexts

Though often overlooked and seen as leisure, the significance and impact of popular music transcends the barriers of what is and is not culture, as it “implies much more than just texts (whether lyrics or musical scores). Musical practices include whole constellations of social uses and meanings” (Connell & Gibson, 2003, p. 3). In fact, more and more researchers are starting to view popular music as a great method of analyzing “representations of place, identity and culture,” while being also considered “the most fluid of cultural forms [...] and a vibrant expression of cultures and traditions, at times held onto vehemently in the face of change” (Connell & Gibson, 2003, p. 9). Just like the more traditional forms of literature, such as novels or poetry, music can also portray the context of a certain place or time or carry some form of social critique. This can be observed, for instance, in the relationship between music and the social movements in the 1960s, that is, between soul music and the American Civil Rights movement. For example, folk singer Pete Seeger was prominent in protest music, and sang what would become the anthem of the Civil Rights movement, “We Shall Overcome” (1963). Therefore, “[a]t a deeper level one must [...] become aware of the ‘cultural uses’ of popular music which may be unintended in its production and which may go beyond its explicit content” (Garofalo, 1985, p. 9). Because of this, it is my contention that popular music is a powerful tool to depict the issues a community is concerned with, as well as to construct and keep a national identity.

American popular culture originated with a “hybridization with deeply racist overtones [...], and a socially constructed ‘frontier’ consisting of pioneers, wild Indians, bad men, and two-fisted [...] heroes” (Buhle, 2006, p. 392). It was made possible thanks to “extensive immigration and urbanization, along with technological and market breakthroughs” which, according to Buhle, “prompted a multifaced mass culture where [more] and more could enjoy the same new [...] music [...], literature [...] and then film” (Buhle, 2006, p. 392). This multifaced mass culture has been present up to today. Nonetheless, nowadays the potential for expansion of mass culture has increased thanks to the process of globalization, allowing it to reach more places and people in less time. Still, popular music has always been as relevant to American popular culture as any other form of cultural expression. However,

popular music tends to be seen as a hobby or as a kind of music played in informal contexts; moreover, “in the eyes of its detractors” popular music “has been ‘reduced’ to commodity form for mass distribution,” and it is precisely because of this “reduction” that it is “not confined to the limited audiences of folk art or fine art” (Garofalo, 1985, p. 5). This underestimation is likely a result of “a tradition of cultural elitism,” which Lily Kong defines as researchers privileging those cultural artifacts that seem more serious and enduring over popular cultural forms that have been disregarded as “mere entertainment,” trivial and ephemeral (qtd. in Connell & Gibson, 2003, p. 3). This view explains why literary works, classical music, painting, and sculpture are often considered proper cultural forms, also “highbrow” culture, while popular music lies on a lower level and is often seen as “lowbrow” culture.

Nonetheless, the perception of popular music as “mere entertainment” could not be any further from reality. In 2016 American singer-songwriter Bob Dylan would controversially be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for “having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition,” thanks to the social critique inherent in his polished lyrics, which “incorporated social struggles and political protest. Love and religion are other important themes in his songs” (Bob Dylan – Facts, 2016). Because literature has been traditionally deemed one of the main sources of culture, the concession of this literature prize to a musician proves the relevance of popular music in cultural contexts. In fact, Connell and Gibson put popular music and literature at the same level when they state: “[p]opular music, alongside other media such as art and literature, operates at many levels, providing a platform for the expression of marginalised voices, while illuminating global alliances and cultural flows” (2003, p. 15). It is my view that performers like Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, or Bruce Springsteen attest to this.

Popular music has a great influence on the culture it depicts, and, by the same token, the culture depicted has a great influence on pop music, as “[p]laces, and their specific socio-historical, economic and political circumstances, shape musical expressions” (Connell & Gibson, 2003, p. 18). This impact is present in the repercussion of jazz music in the U.S. in the early 1920s. In this instance, the relationship between musical expression and sociocultural factors could be seen in New Orleans, where “the crucial mixture of races and cultures developed into a music form [...] which made possible the breakthrough of jazz

records” (Buhle, 2006, p. 396). The Jazz Age also gave rise to rebellious, anti-Puritan behavior portrayed by the carefree flappers and the success of the illegal liquor industry. The flappers would dance to this cheerful music, and prosperity “became a major driving force in musical entertainment and public culture of all kinds” (Buhle, 2006, p. 396).

Nowadays each of the styles that fall within the specter of what may be considered popular music holds its own cultural features, as Connell and Gibson explain in their studies. For instance, country music idealizes the notion of “home” as a safe place to settle and praises domesticity, which is often portrayed negatively in popular music and seen as a place to escape from. At the same time, however, this genre also features unsettled tensions about urban life and the working class. On the other hand, rap and hip-hop are known for their angry and resentful critique of the injustices mainly suffered by people of color and the poor, chanting against marginalization, racism, and capitalism. In addition, it denounces the struggles suffered by people of color as they strive to survive in the “ghetto.” In this sense, “Gangsta” rap, a subgenre of rap traditionally associated with crime, is in fact a form of political and cultural resistance. Similarly, rock music tends to combine entertainment with social identity and values like resistance or alienation among others, highlighting the importance of authenticity for its social critique to be successful (Connell & Gibson, 2003).

It is undeniable that Bruce Springsteen’s birthplace, blue-collar New Jersey, had a remarkable influence on his music. Indeed, Springsteen’s New Jersey is that state “where industrial work had vanished and the latest generation [...] returned from Vietnam, drugged and troubled, became emblematic of a larger complaint, echoed in [...] popular culture” (Buhle, 2006, p. 406). Springsteen got to witness this first-hand by seeing working-class men being sent to the Vietnam War and coming back with financial, mental, and social instability rather than recognition. Experiences like this one had a big impact on the Boss, as they made him realize the hypocrisy of the U.S. Thus, Springsteen uses his lyrics to criticize the duplicity of the American Dream while tackling the social issues present in America at the time when his songs are being written. With his music, the rock singer seeks to put an emphasis on the links between community, place, and identity, mainly analyzing the challenges faced by the working-class and invoking feelings of community and local identity as he depicts “the effects of poverty and uncertainty, [...] the murky reality of the American dream” (Frith, 1988, p. 98). Springsteen tells the stories of a place and its peoples at a certain

time, focusing on the issues the protagonists of his stories face. He relies on this as a means of portraying and denouncing many of the sociopolitical problems haunting the American society (racial issues, discrimination, and class inequalities, among others). For instance, many of the songs from his 1982 album *Nebraska* offer “ravaged tales of despair, defeat and defiance, in the context of an American state rarely celebrated in song lyrics” (Connell & Gibson, 2003, p. 42). In addition, Springsteen’s “The Ghost of Tom Joad” (1995) criticizes the economic situation in the 1990s, overlapping with the new waves of Mexican immigrants arriving in the U.S., and the struggles the working class is facing, thus establishing a parallelism between the current America and that of John Steinbeck’s in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). As a result, Springsteen’s music has also played an important role in creating a common identity by uniting people who feel identified with his lyrics.

It is precisely thanks to its popularity and its potential to tell stories (regardless of whether the song is intended as a critique or meant to reinforce national identity) that popular music has also been used as a political tool:

Music has been used in a variety of political contexts related to the construction and maintenance of national identity, notably through some classical music, national anthems, state music policies and the more recent construction of national rock ’n’ roll traditions and “music ambassadors” for many countries. (Connell & Gibson, 2003, p. 118)

In fact, music has always been present in political campaigns in the United States as an essential part of the American electoral democracy, as it offers several advantages, namely encouraging engagement, persuasion, and public deliberation. Indeed, popular music can function in various ways:

1) as a means of courting the participation of politically disinterested citizens (citizen engagement); 2) as a tool for campaigns to construct and contest symbolic frameworks of interpretation (political persuasion); and 3) as an aesthetic mode of democratic discourse that addresses both the emotional and cognitive aspects of political action (public deliberation). (Coleman, 2010, p. 3)

An example of this is Kanye West’s involvement in Donald Trump’s campaign to attract young and black voters, which the politician struggled to reach. Bruce Springsteen was also an important part of Barack Obama’s campaigns, whose organizers tried to take advantage of what the Boss stood for; he is seen as a critic of the hypocrisy behind the American Dream and a defender of the rights of the working-class. Besides showing up at some of Obama’s

rallies, Springsteen participated in the 2009 presidential inauguration, where he sang a version of “The Rising” (2002). This song, originally written to honor the first responders who lost their lives in 9/11, was reconceptualized to address the “need to rise up *with* Barack Obama to meet the challenges of the American present” (Coleman, 2010, p. 11). While the song was being performed, Springsteen offered a “visual presentation [...] [that] connected his white working-class image with a mixed-race gospel choir, [...] which represented Obama’s vision of a united America that works together towards ‘a more perfect union’” (Coleman, 2010, p. 11).

In addition, Springsteen’s “philosophy of live performance” highlights “his investment in moving audiences toward existential affirmation and social justice” (Dinerstein, 2007, p. 442), values that were associated with Obama’s campaign and which Springsteen aimed to convey. In this sense, Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison argue that “the context of social movements provides music with the cultural resources to heighten their political meaning” (qtd. in Coleman, 2010, p. 4), which was precisely the case of Springsteen’s role in Obama’s campaign. Springsteen’s music was relevant because it stood as the symbol of the united national identity Obama wanted to transmit. At the same time, it addressed one of the most remarkable threats the U.S. had seen in recent history, 9/11, as well as two of the most impactful challenges the country faced at the time (and still does): racism and the rights of the working-class. In conclusion, ever since the first political campaigns in the U.S. (for instance, “Adams and Liberty” in John Adams’s 1800 campaign), music has played a key role, as parties have been using it in order to accomplish a variety of purposes, ranging from “rall[ing] supporters, attract[ing] the attention of politically disinterested citizens, [and] assert[ing] their respective candidates’ status as authentic representatives of the people,” all of which, as Coleman puts it, is “a contribution deserving of serious examination” (2010, p. 17).

In summary, popular music goes far beyond being a form of mere entertainment. It is absolutely relevant in cultural contexts due to its portrayal of the sociocultural conditions of a given place at a given moment; equally of note is its power to strengthen an identity and to generate criticism of those aspects that are not working properly in a specific community. Popular music can move people to act a certain way, and a song can become the symbol of a movement, as seen with Seeger’s version of “We Shall Overcome” during the Civil Rights

movement. Popular music can also be awarded the most important literary prizes, which was proven with Bob Dylan and the Nobel Prize. Moreover, thanks to its inherent power and influence, popular music is heavily relied on even in events that will condition the fate of a country like political campaigns. In addition, as the Jazz Age illustrates, popular music can also have an impact on people's behavior or call for the union of the citizens of a country, as seen with Springsteen.

2.3 An Overview of Bibliography on Bruce Springsteen

Bruce Springsteen has become a symbol that stands for the fight for the working class. His music often displays a rebellious attitude against a country whose highest ideal, the American Dream, is, to a large extent, based on a lie. Therefore, Springsteen's music is characterized by a harsh critique of the American Dream, as well as his determination to debunk some of the most prominent myths that have made America popular as a "land of opportunity" where everyone can supposedly fulfill their Dream. As a result, the Boss's music has been the object of study of many academics, especially in the United States. This can be seen when searching for "Bruce Springsteen" on the digital library of academic sources JStor, as the site offers 3,562 results (as of March 2022). These range from analyses of the lyrics of his songs to portrayals of the social circumstances that contextualize his music, and even comparisons between his songs and other works that may be related to them, among others.

In their book *Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies, and the Runaway American Dream* (2012), professors Kenneth Womack and Jerry Zolten, along with Political Science graduate Mark Bernhard, provide a thorough overview of Springsteen's songs. They organize the book in four parts depending on the main topics and subthemes the singer tackles, such as working-class heroes and the search for American identity, gender identity, religion and ethics, and social justice. Womack et al (2012) quote historian and academic Jefferson Cowie, who, alongside Lauren Boehm, wrote "Dead Man's Town: 'Born in the U.S.A.,' Social History, and Working-Class Identity" (2006). This is one of the many examples of an analysis of one of Springsteen's most critical songs, "Born in the U.S.A.," and its social context while critiquing the Vietnam war and the situation of working-class America in the 1970s and 1980s. However, this is far from being the only song that has been the object of analysis. Because of it being based on Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (2006/1939) and its harsh critique of the socioeconomic context of the 1970s, Springsteen's "The Ghost of Tom Joad"

has been studied on many occasions. The albums *Darkness on the Edge of Town* and *The River*, as well as the single “American Skin (41 Shots),” are other works that have been thoroughly analyzed as well.

As the situation of the American working class is such a prominent topic in Springsteen’s music, many academics have chosen to focus on this when studying his songs. Author Greg Smith compares Springsteen’s portrayals of the American working class during the second half of the twentieth century with Walt Whitman’s vision of it in the nineteenth century. To do this, Smith notes the social circumstances of both periods and analyzes some of Springsteen’s songs, such as “Thunder Road” or, once again, “Born in the U.S.A.” By the same token, Springsteen’s works have also been analyzed in the context of the myths of the American Dream and America as the Promised Land, as in Steven Johnston’s “Bruce Springsteen and the Tragedy of the American Dream” (2007) or Walter Everett’s “Beyond the Palace: Casting the Promised Land” (2007).

Of course, Springsteen’s cast of characters has also been relevant in academic studies. Some of them are average people who have been pushed to the limit and will see themselves obliged to make some questionable decisions that will turn them into criminals. However, others are just desperate people who have become disillusioned with life after losing their jobs and purpose as a result of the social conditions that prevail in a country whose promise of equality does not apply to everyone. In “All We Gotta Do Is Hold Up Our End: Bruce Springsteen and Strain Theory,” authors Craig Hemmens and Mary K. Stohr analyze the diversity of characters throughout Springsteen’s albums in the context of Merton and Agnew’s strain theory. In his work, Professor David Ray Papke tackles the issues of “Crime, Lawbreaking, and Counterhegemonic Humanism in the Songs of Bruce Springsteen” (2007), which are represented by the characters from the singer’s stories. Specific perspectives regarding Springsteen’s characters have been chosen as well. For instance, University of Victoria’s professor Pamela Moss has focused on the role of women in the singer’s works, which she analyzes in “Placing Women in Bruce Springsteen’s Lyrical Landscapes” (2011).

Not only are the Boss’s characters and his critique of the social circumstances in America especially noteworthy, but so is the form he uses for his songs. In this sense, as its title indicates, Alan Rauch’s “Bruce Springsteen and the Dramatic Monologue” deals with

the singer's use of the dramatic monologue in his music. In addition, the author analyzes the way in which Springsteen uses language and tone to transmit the stories of his characters.

Of special interest is *Renegades: Born in the USA* (2021), a work that is centered around conversations between the singer and former president Barack Obama. In these conversations, Obama and Springsteen share their sociopolitical views of America, and more specifically of the growing disparity between the American Dream and reality, among other topics. During these conversations, they refer to Springsteen's songs and Obama's speeches.

Finally, we can find other peer-reviewed articles relating Bruce Springsteen and his music to a variety of more "unusual topics," such as soul music, as in "The Soul Roots of Bruce Springsteen's American Dream," by Joel Dinerstein (2007); queer studies, as in Rosalie Zdzienicka Fanshel's "Beyond Blood Brothers: Queer Bruce Springsteen" (2013); the singer's Italian heritage, as in Samuel F.S. Pardini's "Bruce Zirilli: The Italian Sides of Bruce Springsteen" and Antonella D'Amore's "Bruce Springsteen's World Citizenship," or even the death penalty, as in Gavin Cologne-Brookes' "Dead Man Walking: Nat Turner, William Styron, Bruce Springsteen, and the Death Penalty" (2016). In addition, the Boss's works have even been used as class material, as can be found in Jaclyn Christine Burr's "Springsteen, Spoken Word, and Social Justice: Engaging Students in Activism through Songs and Poetry" (2017). Undeniably, the great and varied number of studies that can be found on Bruce Springsteen proves his importance for America's culture.

3. Analytical Framework: Bruce Springsteen and The Cracks in The American Dream

3.1 War

“Ain’t nothin’ for you here / From the assembly line to the front-line / [...] Now don’t you understand, you died in Vietnam”

“Vietnam” (Springsteen, 1981)

In the second half of the twentieth century, the U.S. was actively involved in three wars: the Korean War (1950-1953), the Vietnam War (1955-1975), and the Gulf War (1990-1991). However, the one that had the biggest impact on the American populace was perhaps the Vietnam War. Its devastation and consequences, as well as most citizens’ eventual disapproval, were the main causes for this. Not only did it seriously hurt the American economy, resulting in inflation, but it also had a critically damaging effect on the citizens’ morale. Many Americans were disillusioned when they were made aware that the ideals the country stood for were not being realized. The same country that prided itself on its patriotism was becoming divided due to the slaughter of over 400 unarmed civilians in My Lai in March 1968, as well as other morally questionable decisions. The myth of American invincibility was being shattered considering the high numbers of American casualties, which eventually led to the withdrawal of the first U.S. troops. In this sense, many veterans “faced negative reactions from both opponents of the war (who viewed them as having killed innocent civilians) and its supporters (who saw them as having lost the war)” (Vietnam War, 2009).

In most of his anti-war songs, Bruce Springsteen depicts the situation faced by returning veterans and the unfair treatment of the American working-class sent to Vietnam. In this section I will start by analyzing the working-class origins of the protagonists of three of the Boss’s anti-war songs: “Born in the U.S.A.” (1984), “The Wall” (2014), and “Highway Patrolman” (1982). Then, I will use the songs “Born in the U.S.A.,” “The Wall” and “Gypsy Biker” (2007) to study Springsteen’s representation of the draft process, that is, how the characters of Springsteen’s songs got drafted and who they blame for their draft. Finally, I will examine the impact their experiences in Vietnam had on the songs’ characters’ regarding both their return to the U.S. and their connections with the Vietnamese. Concerning the former, I will analyze “Highway Patrolman” (1982), in addition to “Born in the U.S.A.”

Respecting the latter, I will study how these connections may be positive, as in the case of “Born in the U.S.A.,” or negative, as in “Galveston Bay” (1995).

As tends to be the case with Springsteen’s songs, all “Born in the U.S.A.,” “The Wall” and “Highway Patrolman” star characters with working-class upbringings. “Born in the U.S.A.” begins explaining that the song’s main character was “[b]orn down in a dead man’s town” (1984) to emphasize the protagonist’s, like most draftees’, humble background; he is, indeed, a working-class man born in a small unimportant town, as opposed to someone from a wealthy city suburb. This blue-collar character probably had to face adversity repeatedly ever since his upbringing, “[t]he first kick I took was when I hit the ground / You end up like a dog that’s been beat too much” (Springsteen, 1984). On the other hand, the narrator of “The Wall” humanizes those sent to the Vietnam War, as he talks about a friend of his who was a musician until he got drafted. Finally, “Highway Patrolman” is narrated by Joe Roberts, a police sergeant concerned about his brother, a Vietnam veteran who returns to the U.S. with serious psychological effects.

Regarding how Springsteen’s characters, as well as many working-class Americans, got drafted to fight in Vietnam, the singer provides two perspectives. In “Born in the U.S.A.,” the singer portrays those working-class Americans who had committed a crime; “The Wall” and “Gypsy Biker” represent innocent blue-collar citizens incapable of avoiding the draft. In this sense, Neiberg and Citino argue that

[this] illustrate[s] the limited choices available to young working-class men in a rapidly deindustrializing America at the end of the twentieth century. Many working-class men in the 1960s and early 1970s faced two options: risk life and limb in the military or suffer the vagaries of financial insecurity in a declining domestic economy. (2016, p. 43)

Thus, Springsteen harshly criticizes how the system of military service was arranged in his anti-war songs like “Born in the U.S.A.,” and “The Wall.” As Christian Appy explains:

[W]orking-class men [...] had far fewer options for avoiding the military in the Vietnam era than did middle-class men because of the way that the American government designed the system of military service. [...] [W]orking-class men did not have the same access to recourses such as college deferment and doctors’ letters [...] to excuse healthy middle-class men from the military. (Appy qtd. in Cohen 2016, p. 46)

Both “Born in the U.S.A.” and “The Wall” denounce the unfair situation suffered by the working class in this matter, though the former delves into the experiences of its protagonist

more deeply. As stated in the second verse of “Born in the U.S.A.,” its protagonist was likely sent to Vietnam because of the previously mentioned deals offered by the criminal justice system, as he “[g]ot into a little hometown jam / So they put a rifle in my hand / Sent me off to a foreign land / To go and kill the yellow man” (Springsteen, 1984). In those lines, Springsteen conveys how, in the case of criminals and offenders, the United States’ criminal justice system would often offer them a deal to avoid prison if they enlisted to fight in Vietnam. While still criticizing the circumstances faced by the working class regarding the Vietnam War, “The Wall” does not present a young offender who reached a deal to avoid prison, but a rock singer called Billy, “[a]h Billy [...] you and your rock and roll band” (Springsteen, 2014).

However, Springsteen’s strongest critique comes with “The Wall” and “Gypsy Biker,” when he refers to the person to blame for working-class people being drafted to fight. In the case of the former, this individual will be revealed to be Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam era. The song unarguably denounces his hypocrisy, “[n]ow the man who put you here / He feeds his family in rich dining halls / And apology and forgiveness have no place here at all” (Springsteen, 2014). While blue-collar people struggle to meet ends, the man in power enjoys a wealthy life isolated from the circumstances of the former and ignoring them. This dominance of the wealthy over the fate of the working class is also emphasized in a blunter way in the context of the Iraq War in “Gypsy Biker”: “[t]he speculators made their money on the blood you shed / [...] Profiteers on James Street sold your shoes and clothes” (Springsteen, 2007).

The exception to this disregard is dying in combat, as in the case of “The Wall”’s protagonist, in which case the politician apologizes, “I read Robert McNamara say he’s sorry” (Springsteen, 2014), referring to the Secretary of Defense’s apology published in 1996, to which the narrator responds, “apology and forgiveness have no place here at all” (Springsteen, 2014). As Neiberg and Citino put it: “[t]he song expresses [...] the theme of individual suffering owing to mistakes in American foreign policy, and it indicts a system that allowed some people to grow rich from military contracts while others reluctantly gave their lives for unclear causes” (2016, pp. 53-54). In this sense, “The Wall” is set in a memorial of shared trauma, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., consisting of two walls with the names of nearly 60,000 American soldiers who died or went missing in action

during the Vietnam War (Valimaki, 2019, p. 116). The Boss sings ragefully about his friend's fate and, similar to what he does in "Born in the U.S.A.," Springsteen strongly criticizes how the people in power obliged mostly working-class people to fight in the Vietnam War. In this respect, Michel S. Neiberg and Robert M. Citino highlight Springsteen's concern for American soldiers and his frequent emphasis on their mistreatment as evidence of an unfulfilled American promise that disproportionately affected the working-class (2016, p. 44).

In both "Born in the U.S.A." and "The Wall," Springsteen denounces the unfair outcome of two working-class men who were sent to fight in Vietnam. While the protagonists of each of the songs had different outcomes (the first one was able to return to the U.S., while the second died in the war), their fates were equally tragic. Even if the protagonist of "Born in the U.S.A." was able to make it back alive, he is completely alienated from society and feels like he no longer has something to live for. Neither does he think he belongs anywhere, nor are the citizens of his town willing to help him reintegrate into society. "Born in the U.S.A." just tells the story of one of these working-class returnees, but it is one many veterans may identify with. The song features the voice of a disillusioned Vietnam veteran "seemingly indicting the United States for its alleged racist and ill-conceived war against the Vietnamese and for its deplorable treatment of returning Vietnam veterans" (Massaro, qtd. in Womack et al, 2012, p. 244). Still, this song tackles loss as well, as the narrator explains how he "had a brother at Khe Sanh / Fighting off the Viet Cong / They're still there, he's all gone" (Springsteen, 1984). This feeling of loss is also part of many of the veterans' and citizens' shared consciousness regarding "America's self-defeating adventure in Vietnam" (Gellman, qtd. in Womack et al, 2012, p. 22), as the song represents the many Americans who lost a loved one in Vietnam. This includes Springsteen himself, who lost one of his friends, also a musician.

Similarly, "Highway Patrolman" exposes the individual psychological consequences of coming back from a war, in this case Vietnam, to a country that does not seem to care about its veterans. The song is narrated by Joe Roberts, "a sergeant out on Perrineville, barracks number 8" who, unlike his brother, was able to avoid getting drafted, "Frankie went in the army back in 1965 / I got a farm deferment, settled down" (Springsteen, 1982). However, Franky comes back deeply troubled, "[m]an turns his back on his family [...] /

There was a kid on the floor lookin' bad bleedin' hard from his head / There was a girl cryin' at a table it was Frankie she said," but does not receive the psychological help or treatment he needs from the country that caused him those issues. His brother seems to be the only one who tries to help him, "I catch him when he's strayin' like any brother would," suggesting that if America treated its citizens like brothers, sufferings like Frank's would be preventable. Springsteen thus denounces "the damage that war does to its veterans and their families, and it gestures to gaps in the underfunded systems meant to help those damaged people" (Harde, 2013, p. 130).

This feeling of abandonment is also present in Springsteen's "Youngstown": "[w]e sent our sons to Korea and Vietnam / Now we're wondering what they were dyin' for" (1995). By the same token, Springsteen shows this hypocrisy in "Born in the U.S.A." relating the experience of its protagonist in the Vietnam War with the blue-collar America he encountered, one "sheltered only by the empty shell of a failed social patriotism, contained in a hometown under attack, and fighting in little but isolation and silence" (Cowie and Boehm, 2006, p. 356). As Cowie and Boehm put it, "Born in the U.S.A." "is actually more of a song about silence—both existential and political" (2006, p. 359) as can be seen in the way both the labor market and the government's Veterans Administration disregard the veteran's situation and needs. This scene also reflects the way "[t]he 'hiring' and 'VA' [...] man represent the narrator's direct ties to institutional protection and aid within the crumbling powers of the economy and the liberal state" (Cowie & Boehm, qtd. in Womack et al, 2012, p. 36). Moreover, this disregard highlights how, despite affectionately calling him son, "[n]either, though, offers help, and there is no explanation" (Cowie & Boehm, qtd. in Womack et al, 2012, p. 36). The protagonist narrates how the country he fought for will not provide him with economic compensation for his services or even a job, denouncing a situation common to many veterans, "[c]ome back home to the refinery / Hiring man says, 'Son if it was up to me'" (1984). As can be seen in these lines, "[w]hen the protagonist returns to his hometown, he discovers his service to his country has gained him nothing. His brother was killed in Vietnam, and the refinery is not hiring" (Hemmens & Stohr, 2007, p. 112). The veteran then asks the Veterans Administration for help, "[w]ent down to see my V.A. man," but he gets nothing but an unsatisfactory response, "[s]on don't you understand." Not only does this represent the isolation of a man who is accepted neither as a part of his own

community nor of his own army, but in doing this Springsteen also places him in a liminal space between community and army. The singer highlights this isolation by stating “[i]t’s like he has nothing left to tie him into society anymore. He’s isolated from the government. Isolated from his family” (Springsteen qtd. in Flippo, 1984, pp. 54-55).

This alienation is further developed in the last verse of “Born in the U.S.A.,” which brings us back to what seems like the present, 1984. Here, we can see the future of the veteran, as the lyrics allude once again to the situation of a jobless America, this time ten years after the end of the war. Although it has been ten years since the veteran returned to his country, he still has not been able to find a job which is personally and financially satisfying (Massaro, qtd. in Womack et al, 2012, p. 244). Just as the American industry would toss blue-collar men aside when they were no longer required, “so, too, did the government [...] with working-class soldiers once the war that required their sacrifice had ended” (Neiberg and Citino, 2016, p. 56). As a result, the protagonist of “Born in the U.S.A.” has reached a point of no return where he has “[n]owhere to run, ain’t got nowhere to go” (1984).

Not only do Springsteen’s songs oppose “the meanness with which American society has treated the men it has sent to fight wars it later repudiated” (Neiberg and Citino, 2016, p. 56), but also the immorality of war itself. In both “Born in the U.S.A.” and “Galveston Bay” the singer creates connections between American and Vietnamese people. This link may symbolize “how emotions can overpower social categorizations” (Stur, qtd. in Womack et al, 2012, p. 112). It likewise allows us to visualize the rejection of the Vietnam War many Americans felt, in this case by challenging our expectations regarding the relationships between the Americans and the Vietnamese in different ways. In “Born in the U.S.A.” we learn that the protagonist’s deceased brother “had a woman he loved in Saigon,” and that all that remains of him is the picture he keeps, “I got a picture of him in her arms now” (Springsteen, 1984). This shows an unexpected emotional connection between a Vietnamese woman and an American man fighting against her country. In addition, this image goes against the warrior myth and illustrates how those rejecting the myth and the war focused on building “community amid the destruction of the Vietnam War” (Stur, qtd. in Womack et al, 2012, p. 112). This also highlights the role of women “in some of [Springsteen’s] songs as the veterans’ protectors. In others, they inspire men’s decisions to reject the warrior role and

locate their source of manhood in family life” (Stur, qtd. in Womack et al, 2012, p. 112), which was one of the causes for army desertions.

“Galveston Bay” presents these connections between American and Vietnamese people in a completely different manner. The song features two protagonists: Le Bing Son and Billy Sutter. Le is a Vietnamese man who has moved to Galveston Bay with his family after having “[f]ought side by side with the Americans / In the mountains and deltas of Vietnam” (Springsteen, 1995). He may embody the “cracks of the American Dream,” as he “brought his family to the promised land” (Springsteen, 1995) looking for a better life. On the other hand, Billy is a working-class American Vietnam veteran who “fought with Charlie Company / In the highlands of Quang Tri / He was wounded in the battle of Chu Lai / And shipped home in ’68.” Billy and Le seemingly have a lot in common, as they are both veterans of Vietnam who fought for the U.S. now living in Galveston Bay, Texas and making a living from fishing. Though they both fought on the same side, they see each other as enemies because of their ethnic origins: “[Billy] and his friends watched as the refugees came [...] / Soon in the bars [...] was talk / Of America for Americans.” These words also emphasize the nonsense of war, as the song presents American and Vietnamese people who had fought together but now are killing each other: “[t]wo Texans lay dead on the ground / Le stood with a pistol in his hand / [...] Billy said ‘My friend, you’re a dead man.’” However, just as in “Born in the U.S.A.,” Springsteen sends a message of optimism regarding the coexistence between the Vietnamese and the Americans when Billy decides not to kill Le, in spite of the aforementioned conflict between both, “Le stood watch along the waterside / Billy stood in the shadows / His K-bar knife in his hand / [...] As he walked by Billy stuck his knife into his pocket / Took a breath and let him pass” (Springsteen, 1995). Instead, the focus is on enjoying his “source of manhood in family life”: “Billy rose up / Went into the kitchen for a drink of water / Kissed his sleeping wife.”

“Born in the U.S.A.” and “Galveston Bay” show how both the Americans, mostly working-class men obliged to fight for a cause they did not believe in, and the Vietnamese have something in common: they are, in one way or another, victims. The “picture of him in her arms” from “Born in the U.S.A” captures “the blurring of distinctions between ally and enemy, self and other, hometowns and Saigon,” and accomplishes this “by uniting both the American working class and the Vietnamese as co-victims of some inexplicable ‘they’”

(Cowie and Boehm, 2006, p. 367). Similarly, Americans and Vietnamese wanting to kill each other after the war is over, in spite of having fought on the same side, emphasizes the nonsense of the war and the rejection towards it.

In addition to criticizing America's treatment of its veterans in his anti-war songs, Springsteen also denounces the abandonment suffered by the American working class in the 1970s and 80s. The Boss hoped his critiques would have an impact on other subsequent wars the U.S. was involved in, such as Afghanistan (2001-2014) or Iraq (2003-2011). During the Afghanistan War, he "began to play 'Born in the U.S.A.' more often, an admonition that the country could not risk abandoning its Afghanistan veterans as it had once abandoned its Vietnam veterans" (Nieberg and Citino, 2016, pp. 58-59). Unfortunately, this did not have the desired effect of dissuading the U.S. from making the same mistakes. Regarding the wars in Iraq and Vietnam, Springsteen later released "Last to Die" (2007), where he emphasizes the hypocrisy of a country that did not seem to care for its soldiers. The singer alternates verses about a military convoy in Iraq, "[w]e don't measure the blood we've drawn anymore / We just stack the bodies outside the door / [...] The sun sets in flames as the city burns / [...] as things fall apart," and a scene with an American family driving with "[t]he kids asleep in the backseat" (Springsteen, 2007). This symbolizes how citizens isolated themselves from the reality of war their compatriots were experiencing, "civilians no longer consider the distance between themselves and the soldiers [...], a damning indication that they will also be willing to forget [them] [...] once they return home" (Nieberg and Citino, 2016, p. 61).

Therefore, not only do Springsteen's anti-war songs illustrate his rejection of war, but they also evidence the cracks in the American Dream for war veterans. Many experienced unfair drafts that hurt the working class more than anyone else. Moreover, the abandonment they would suffer from their country both from an economic and psychological perspective stopped veterans from having equal opportunity when it came to fulfilling their American Dreams.

3.2 Race

“It ain’t no secret [...] / You can get killed just for living in your American skin”
“American Skin (41 Shots)” (Springsteen, 2003)

Race has been defined by social scientists as a socially constructed category. In this sense, Max Weber was the first to highlight the social component of race as opposed to biologist notions prevalent in the nineteenth century (Omi & Winant, 1986, p. 4). Weber’s theory was later supported by anthropologist Frank Boas and by Bonilla-Silva himself, who highlights that this social reality has repercussions on actors racialized as “black” or “white.” However, there is little agreement on what race implies. Some, such as Yehudi O. Webster in *The Racialization of America* (1992), argue that it is an abstract concept and that it is social scientists that make it real; controversially, other researchers, like Peter Lehmann et al in “Racial and Ethnic Disparities in School Discipline: The Interactive Effects of Gender and Parental Educational Attainment” (2021), prove the existence of racial differences in academic achievement and crime, among other fields.

Ever since the concept of race first emerged, it gave rise to a racialized social system that favored Europeans (“white”) over non-Europeans (“nonwhites”) (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, pp. 8-9). Historically, race has been a controversial issue in the U.S. since the beginnings of the country. The violence and massacres against Native Americans and their subsequent discrimination, slavery, the concentration camps for Japanese people, Jim Crow laws, and police violence are just a few examples of the injustices suffered by people of color in the U.S. This likely has a lot to do with the idea of who qualified as an American, “usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure” (Lorde, 1984, p. 2). In fact, immigration to the U.S. was restricted on the basis of race for many years. People of color in America continue to suffer the inequalities of a system built around this norm. In this sense, blacks and dark-skinned racial minorities are more likely to be poor, earn lower wages, and suffer discrimination in several other sectors, such as housing and education. In addition, they tend to be targets of racial profiling (using race as a factor when determining whom to stop and search because they are suspicious of crime) by the police and victims of a highly racialized criminal court system (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, pp. 1-2).

Bruce Springsteen has denounced some of the aforementioned situations in his music. In this section, I will start by analyzing the different environments that may have contributed

to the hatred and biases that result in crimes against people of color. In this first part I will focus on “My Hometown” (1984), where Springsteen refers to the conflict between blacks and whites in an average American town; “Black Cowboys” (1997), which portrays life in the ghetto; and “Galveston Bay,” featuring the confrontation between Vietnamese and Americans. Then, I will analyze the issue of representation regarding the perception of race and bias in “American Skin (41 Shots)” (2003), where Springsteen criticizes the use of racial profiling; “Black Cowboys,” which alludes to the issue of representation of people of color in mainstream media; and “Worlds Apart” (2002), addressing the rejection against Muslims after 9/11. Finally, I will analyze Springsteen’s representations of racial violence in “Black Cowboys” and in “American Skin (41 Shots),” in which Springsteen denounces police violence against black people and questions “the veil of race” (DuBois, 2007/1903).

Regarding the settings presented in “My Hometown,” “Black Cowboys” and “Galveston Bay,” one can see that all of them feature people immersed in different social environments that promoted hatred and internal biases against people of color. In this sense, “My Hometown” is probably set in Springsteen’s own hometown in Freehold, New Jersey, but it represents the situation in “American cities where processes of economic transformation, especially deindustrialisation, have struck mercilessly” (Kloosterman, 2020). Moreover, the song takes place at three different times, but it is in 1965, coinciding with the Civil Rights movement, that conflict between whites and blacks seems to arise, “[i]n ’65 tension was running high / At my high school / There was a lot of fights / Between the black and white” (Springsteen, 1984). However, rather than trying to stop the fights, people seemed hopeless and passive as tension continued to rise, “[t]here was nothing you could do / Two cars at a light on a Saturday night / In the back seat there was a gun / Words were passed in a shotgun blast / Troubled times had come.” As can be seen from these lines, what started as a high school fight between two different racial groups escalated to gun violence and killings as people remained passive.

Though in a different setting and time, these aggressions that went ignored and even taken for granted are also present in the first lines of “Black Cowboys” (1997). This time, the song is placed in Mott Haven, a low-income neighborhood in the Bronx, possibly in the 1990s. It presents streets as a place of contrast where black people get killed and children play naturally: “Williams’ playground was the Mott Haven streets / Where he ran past melted

candles and flower wreaths / Names and photos of young black faces / Whose death and blood consecrated these places” (Springsteen, 1997). In this case, “Springsteen suggests that society’s failure to look out for others not only dooms individuals, but also ultimately destroys communities,” and even seems to imply that “[i]f no one is concerned with the well-being of the individuals around them, the community those individuals are charged with maintaining will decay” (Stonerook, qtd. in Womack et al, 2012, p. 224). This is proved by the destruction and crisis that brought the degeneration of this society, and the exodus of its citizens: “[n]ow Main Street’s whitewashed windows / And vacant stores / Seems like there ain’t nobody / Wants to come down here no more / [...] ‘these jobs are going, boys / And they ain’t coming back’” (Springsteen, 1984).

Similarly, these local racial conflicts are present in “Galveston Bay.” As mentioned in section 3.1, Galveston Bay, Texas is the scenario of the racial tensions between American veterans and Vietnamese immigrants in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. In this case, Americans justified their aggressions against the Vietnamese accusing them of stealing their jobs and taking over their town, “[Billy] and his friends watched as the refugees came / Settle on the same streets and worked the coast they grew up on” (Springsteen, 1995). As Steven Fein puts it, “[b]eing injured in Vietnam and then watching the refugees compete with him for the finite resources in Galveston Bay, seemed to threaten Billy’s sense of his place [...], his self-image and his feelings of security” (Fein, qtd in Womack et al, 2012, p. 236). As a result, Americans like Billy decided to confront this situation by physically attacking (and even killing) those who, because of their appearance, might be easily identifiable as Vietnamese and, therefore, guilty. To those Americans, up until the end of the song, physical features (i.e., “race”) outweighed the fact that these specific refugees had actually collaborated with Americans during the war. As usual in racial conflict, its participants focused more on their differences than on everything they shared, and in so doing Springsteen “reveals the humanity common to these two very different men. They each rise early in the morning, kiss their sleeping children, and try to make a living by casting their nets into the water” (Fein, qtd in Womack et al, 2012, p. 236).

The issue of Americans looking away from the escalating racial conflict throughout the second half of the twentieth century in many American towns is undoubtedly worth mentioning. Nevertheless, the ways in which race was perceived and represented during this

time was likely another factor that led to the bias that cost lives like Amadou Diallo's, the West African immigrant Springsteen talks about in "American Skin (41 Shots)." Diallo was shot 41 times and consequently murdered by four white police officers who thought he fit the description of a serial rapist while he was entering his apartment building in 1999. This event sparked a debate on the controversial use of "racial profiling." This is further examined by Renny Christopher, who explains how the song displays the intersections between race, gender, and, as with many of Springsteen's songs, class, all of which are likely to have influenced the actions carried out by the police officers:

Amadou Diallo probably would not have been shot if he weren't black, if he weren't male. The four police offers [sic] who shot him are all men and are all white. Diallo was a street vendor, a poor working-class immigrant. The cops are working-class men. The protest by the cops is based in [sic] class; the defense of the song by critics of the cops is based in [sic] race. (2002, p. 160)

"American Skin (41 Shots)" raises the question of whether the officers' perception of a gun instead of a wallet came from their "eyes" (which would be an oblique way of referring to Diallo's skin color, which is perceived through this organ) or their "heart," implying the possibility that their racial bias had made them more susceptible to the misperception of the wallet for a gun (Fein, qtd. in Womack et al, 2012, p. 230). Springsteen emphasizes this when he sings, "[i]s it in your heart [...], is it in your eyes [...] / It ain't no secret." Later, the second line of the chorus is slightly changed to replace the second line of the chorus: "[i]s it a gun [...], is it a knife [...] / Is it a wallet [...], this is your life" (Springsteen, 2003).

With "Black Cowboys" Springsteen also presents the issue of representation of people of color. Not only does the song debunk the stereotype that black boys are lazy that still prevails in American society, as argued by Bonilla-Silva (2013, p. 4), but it also critiques the lack of representation of people of color in mainstream media. In this respect, Springsteen sings: "Raney'd do his work and put his books away" (Springsteen, 1997). The issue of representation of people of color in mainstream media is relevant because, as bell hooks argues, "[t]here is a direct [...] connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy [...] and the institutionalization via mass media of [...] representations of race [...] that support and maintain the [...] overall domination of all black people" (1992, p. 2). In the case of "Black Cowboys," we witness Raney's mom's concern over him not being exposed to unbiased representations of people like him. When Raney was a child, his mother

rejected the representations of white cowboys that were shown on TV, “[t]here was a channel showed a Western movie everyday,” and which systematically excluded the existence of a majority of black and Latino cowboys. Consequently, Raney’s mother would make up for the lack of inclusive representation on TV and in school materials: “Lynette brought him home books on the black cowboys of the Oklahoma range.” Later on, this experience will have an impact on Raney’s life as he will escape to Oklahoma, the land of the black cowboys with whom his younger self identified, “Rainey leaves his mother and takes a train to the West, becoming a black cowboy himself, asserting the possibility of a better future [...] and joining history by doubling back upon it” (Dolphin qtd. in Womack et al, 2012, pp. 54-55).

While most of Springsteen’s songs about race deal with African American people, “Worlds Apart” is focused on the biases against Middle Eastern people after 9/11. Written at a time when America has experienced a rise in Islamophobia and for some Americans Middle-easterners are “the enemy,” the Boss calls for unity and forgiveness rather than hatred and revenge: “[s]ometimes the truth just ain’t enough or it’s too much in times like this / Let’s throw the truth away, we’ll find it in this kiss / [...] May the living let us in before the dead tear us apart” (Springsteen, 2002).

Regarding racial violence, in “American Skin (41 Shots)” and in the first lines of “Black Cowboys,” Springsteen denounces how the aforementioned issues of representation and environments of hatred and biases typically escalate till they become a much bigger problem. Both songs are set in the Bronx, in New York City. While “Black Cowboys” brings forward “the perils of the ghetto life” (Murphy, qtd. in Womack et al, 2012, p. 188), it is “American Skin (41 Shots)” that denounces violence the most harshly. In this song, rather than “condemning [or] [...] condoning the police’s actions” (Fein, qtd. in Womack et al, 2012, p. 230), Springsteen chooses not to pick a side, as he focuses on the consequences of living in such a racially biased and dangerous society. The most striking images are perhaps the allusions to how black children are raised to avoid murders like Diallo’s, or more recently George Floyd’s, among many others: “[s]he says, ‘On these streets, Charles / You’ve got to understand the rules / If an officer stops you, promise me you’ll always be polite / [...] Promise Mama you’ll keep your hands in sight” (Springsteen, 2003). This scene may be reminiscent of Lynette trying to keep her black son safe, but rather than protecting him in her house, Charles’ mother prepares him for situations with the police which may be potentially

life-threatening. In addition, the fact that this conversation takes place as “Lena gets her son ready for school” establishes a parallelism between the education Charles receives at school to prepare him for life and the education he gets from his own mother to help him stay alive while “living in your American skin.” If the individual does not follow these rules and keeps their “hands in sight,” the question then arises: “Is it a gun, is it a knife / Is it a wallet, this is your life” (Springsteen, 2003). This song has triggered controversy over the issue of whether or not the protagonist’s death was the result of racial bias or an accident. As Renny Christopher puts it in his article “Springsteen, Diallo, and the NYC Police: An Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class”:

What makes the song controversial is the suggestion that this tragedy wasn’t accidental, but one with its roots in the American system of race relations, that is, in white supremacy which results in a practice like racial profiling, which only the utterly disingenuous [...] [,] racist or [...] blind could disavow as a cause of the Diallo shooting. (2002, p. 170)

To conclude, Springsteen’s songs on race denounce how people of color experience another crack in the American Dream, the same one that assures equal opportunity to succeed while promising American citizens life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. “American Skin (41 Shots)” is about a black immigrant who came to the U.S. with his parents hoping for a better life. However, he is unable to fulfill this dream because he gets killed by the police as a result of the American system of race relations. Similarly, “Galveston Bay” presents a community where Americans and Vietnamese refugees seeking a better life in the Promised Land in the aftermath of the Vietnam War are fighting and killing each other. “My Hometown” features a society of racial violence and economic decline whose citizens want to escape, and “sketches in less than 5 min the history of a city of prosperity in the 1950s, a city of race riots in the 1960s and deep decline in the 1980s” (Kloosterman, 2020, p. 3). In fact, the song ends with the narrator intending to leave his hometown, hoping to fulfill his American Dream somewhere else: “[l]ast night me and Kate we laid in bed / Talking about getting out / Packing up our bags, maybe heading south” (Springsteen, 1984). “Black Cowboys” has the same ending, as its protagonist escapes from his native Mott Haven and the microcosm of violence and drugs he grew up in due to the impossibility of improving his life there. Thus, Springsteen shows and criticizes how race is an obstacle for minorities to pursue their American Dreams.

3.3 Immigration

“There’s treasure for the taking, for any hard working man / Who’ll make his home in the American land”

“American Land” (Springsteen, 2006)

The issues related to immigration in the U.S., especially regarding the border with Mexico, may seem like a recent topic because of the importance it tends to be given in political discourse (Donald Trump’s antiimmigration policies, especially the wall on the Mexican-American border and his controversies with ICE and deportation, and Kamala Harris and Joe Biden’s support for the “dreamers” and their stopping the construction of the wall, among others). However, this topic has been a subject of debate and controversy ever since the foundation of the country. The restrictions imposed by the U.S. on immigration would prevent many migrants from reaching the Promised Land and being able to fulfill their American Dreams. According to Lopez (2006), first were the Chinese exclusion laws of the 1880s that initially suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers and later the immigration of any Chinese national and all Asians in 1917. These restrictions on Asians lasted until 1965. Moreover, the National Origin Act of 1924 aimed at restricting immigration from “supposedly racially undesirable southern and eastern Europeans [...] [and] confine immigration as much as possible to western and northern European stock” (Lopez, 2006, p. 27). During the Depression of the 1930s, the focus was put on Mexican immigrants, who would later be deported in mass during what was called “Operation Wetback” in the 1950s (Lopez, 2006, pp. 27-28).

Not only have there been restrictions on immigration, but also on citizenship. The Dred Scott case of 1857 declared that “all Blacks, free and enslaved, were not and could never be citizens because they were ‘a subordinate and inferior class of beings’” (Lopez, 2006, p. 29). Although this view changed with the Civil Rights Act of 1866, minorities, especially Native Americans, continued to be legally discriminated against until 1924. In addition, since the 1920s, controversy arose from the rejection of citizenship for “children born here [in the U.S.] to undocumented immigrants” (Lopez, 2006, p. 30). As Lopez puts it, this appeared “to be motivated not by an abstract concern over the political status of the parents, but by racial animosity against Asians and Latinos” (2006, p. 30). Moreover, up until the 1940s,

naturalization (citizenship after birth) was limited to white individuals (Lopez, 2006, pp. 27-34).

Still, immigration is a hugely controversial topic in the U.S. The country has often been accused of continuing to be biased to prevent individuals from certain races and nationalities (mainly Latinos, especially Mexicans, and Middle-Easterners) and backgrounds (migrants need to prove economic reliability to be able to reside in the U.S. legally) from migrating into the country. This situation is heavily criticized in some of Springsteen's songs, which he uses to tell stories about people trying to migrate to the U.S. in an attempt to humanize their plight for American-born citizens who may be indifferent or insensitive to the situation.

In this section I will analyze Springsteen's portrayals of the immigrant struggle to fulfill their Dreams in the "Promised Land." First, I will study the background of many Mexican migrants in "Sinaloa Cowboys" (1995), "Matamoros Banks" (2005) and "Balboa Park" (1995). Second, I will use the former two songs, in addition to "Across the Border" (1995), to examine migrants' rough journeys to reach the U.S. Finally, I will discuss whether migrants' expectations for their lives in the U.S. were met or not in "Galveston Bay" (1995), "Sinaloa Cowboys" and "Balboa Park."

As it is common in Springsteen's songs, the characters he features tend to be blue-collar people who are struggling. This is the case of the characters in "Sinaloa Cowboys," "Matamoros Banks" and "Balboa Park": "'Sinaloa Cowboys' and 'Balboa Park' are ballads narrated in the third person about undocumented Mexicans who die in California in the course of trying to make a life for themselves in the illegal drug trade" (Lifshey, 2009, p. 223). "Sinaloa Cowboys" introduces Miguel, a man who "came from a small town in northern Mexico / [...] with his brother Louis to California / [...] And found work together in the fields of the San Joaquin" (Springsteen, 1995), addressing the brothers' belonging to the working class.

Similarly, the protagonist of "Matamoros Banks" is a man who, though not explicitly stated, can be inferred to come from a rough blue-collar background in Mexico. The man (unsuccessfully) tries to reach America hoping for a better life and to reunite with the woman he loves, which might as well symbolize his idealizations and hopes for the Promised Land. However, even if on the surface he appears to be talking about a woman, this immigrant may actually be singing about his romanticized version of America: "[y]our sweet memory comes

on the evenin' wind / I sleep and dream of holding you in my arms again / The lights of Brownsville, across the river shine" (Springsteen, 2005).

Finally, "Balboa Park" is inspired in Sebastian Rotella's newspaper article "Children of the Border: Caught in a Makeshift Life: Immigrants: Youths eke out a living in San Diego's Balboa Park. Drugs, prostitution are means of survival" (1993), which raises awareness of the tough and dangerous lives of undocumented immigrant children who have been left behind in San Diego. Springsteen's song presents the story of one of those children, "[h]e grew up near the Zona Norte with the hustlers and smugglers he hung out with" who puts his life in danger to deal drugs for a living, "[h]e swallowed their balloons of cocaine, brought 'em across the Twelfth Street strip" (Springsteen, 1995). Unlike the protagonists of the other two songs I have mentioned, the character in "Balboa Park" is not even a working-class individual, but a victim of the circumstances he grew up in. However, he still has something in common with the other characters, that is, his determination to improve his life in the Promised Land, "[h]e did what he had to for the money" (Springsteen, 1995).

As aforementioned, while each immigrant has their own story, Springsteen emphasizes that which unites them: they all see the United States as the Promised Land where they will be able to have a better life and are willing to give up everything they have to achieve it. In "Sinaloa Cowboys," "Matamoros Banks" and "Across the Border" Springsteen presents the sometimes fatal arduousness immigrants from Mexico go through during their journeys to the U.S. border. For instance, Miguel and Louis, the protagonists of "Sinaloa Cowboys," had to cross "at the river levee when Louis was just sixteen," leaving "their homes and family" (Springsteen, 1995).

Both "Matamoros Banks" and "Across the Border" provide a more detailed account of the theme of "the journey." However, "Matamoros Banks" is perhaps the rawest. The song includes a preface by Springsteen that raises awareness of the issue: "[e]ach year many die crossing the deserts, / Mountains and rivers of our southern border / In search of a better life." The preface also presents the topic of the song, that is, the journey of a Mexican immigrant who has died trying to reach the Promised Land: "I follow the / Journey backwards, from the body at the / River bottom, to the man walking across / The desert towards the banks of the Rio Grande" (Springsteen, 2005). The narration begins with the impactful image of a Mexican migrant's corpse floating on the river, "[f]or two days the river keeps you down /

Then you rise to the light without a sound / [...] The turtles eat the skin from your eyes [...] / Your clothes give way to the current and river stone / 'Till every trace of who you ever were is gone" (Springsteen, 2005). This image is rather self-revealing and seems to summarize the story, as we can easily infer the man's origins and hopes from his fate, as well as Springsteen's critique of the suffering immigrants like him must endure to reach America.

The singer details some of this suffering later in the song, when he presents another visual description of the man's journey: "I walk on sandals of twine and tire tread / My pockets full of dust, my mouth filled with cool stone / The pale moon opens the earth to its bones." Not only do the sandals made of twine and tire tread speak of his economic situation, but the view of a thirsty and hungry man ("my mouth filled with cool stone") crossing a desert ("[m]y pockets full of dust") while wearing them also resembles the biblical narrative of Jesus' forty days in the desert. This similarity highlights the migrant's goodwill and innocence, as well as his senseless suffering. Nonetheless, the end of the migrant's struggle does not come from happily reaching his destination, but when he dies just before crossing the border: "[t]he lights of Brownsville, across the river shine / A shout rings out and into the silty red river I dive." In addition to representing his death, this river also symbolizes the liminality of a migrant who dies in no man's land, between Mexico and America, a migrant who has managed to escape his "previous life" but has not been able to reach a new one. Moreover, the man was "killed" by America herself, as it can be inferred that he was shot by the U.S. Border Patrol, as there a homonymic resemblance between Springsteen's "a shout rings out" and "a shot rings out" (Lifshey, 2009, p. 239).

"Across the Border" offers a different perspective of the journey through a more optimistic tone. Unlike the "Matamoros Banks," "Across the Border" focuses more on the thoughts and hopes of its protagonist right before his journey, "[t]onight my bag is packed / Tomorrow I'll walk these tracks / That will lead me across the border" (Springsteen, 1995) than on his physical struggle. In this song, Springsteen represents the U.S. as the Promised Land: "[in] 'Across the Border,' [...] the promised land is at last understood in a manner comparable to its Biblical and Puritan presentation" (Allen, qtd. in Womack et al, 2012, pp. 135-136). In this sense, the narrator compares the current situation he hopes to escape from with his expectations regarding the U.S.: "[w]e'll leave behind my dear / The pain and sadness we found here / [...] I'll build a house / High upon a grassy hill / Somewhere across

the border / Where pain and memory / [...] have been stilled” (Springsteen, 1995). Here, we can indeed relate Springsteen’s “house upon a grassy hill” with Winthrop’s reference to the Puritan colony of Massachusetts as “a city upon a hill” (Winthrop, 1630). Moreover, the idealization of the landscape the migrant hopes to find in America, “[p]astures of gold and green / Roll down into cool clear waters” (Springsteen, 1995), resembles the Bible’s Paradise. Therefore, though never explicitly referring to the U.S. as the Promised Land, “Across the Border” is full of references representing it as such. In this sense, while the song expresses the hopes of its protagonist from a religious perspective, the idea of the journey being the way to a better life in America is part of the migrants’ shared consciousness.

Unfortunately, only a small portion of the immigrants who have left everything behind and risked their lives (as seen in “Matamoros Banks”) to fulfill their American Dreams in the U.S. are able to do so. In “Galveston Bay,” “Sinaloa Cowboys” and “Balboa Park” Springsteen shows the outcomes of the protagonists of his stories. As previously mentioned, “Galveston Bay” presents the story of Le Bing Son, a Vietnamese man who helped the Americans during the Vietnam War. As is the case with many immigrants, Le “brought his family to the promised land” looking to fulfill his American Dream through hard work, “[h]e worked as a machinist, put his money away / And bought a shrimp boat with his cousin / And together they harvested Galveston Bay” (Springsteen, 1995). However, what he finds in Galveston Bay, Texas is far from the welcoming town he expected. In the same town we find Billy Sutter, a Vietnam veteran like Le who returned to Galveston Bay and “[t]here he married and worked the gulf finishing grounds / In a boat that’d been his father’s.” In these stories we can find the dichotomy between progress and tradition, the same Billy and his friends claim is being threatened by the immigrants in the town who, as previously mentioned, “[s]ettle on the same streets and work the coast they grew up on.” As a response to this, “in the bars [...] was talk / Of America for Americans / [...] ‘You want ’em out, you got to burn ’em out’ / And brought in the Texas klan.” This situation triggered confrontation between those born in America and the Vietnamese immigrants who had arrived trying to earn a living. The situation Springsteen depicts in “Galveston Bay” is used as one of the most common antiimmigration arguments in the U.S. This point of view was recently fueled by Donald Trump, who claimed that immigrants were stealing American’s jobs and lives. When talking about Mexicans in July 2015 he stated: “[t]hey’re taking our jobs. They’re taking our

manufacturing jobs. They're taking our money. They're killing us" (Trump, qtd. in Kohn, 2016). A month later, Trump accused Asian immigrants of a similar problem: "jobs are being stolen [...] like candy from a baby" (Trump, qtd. in Kohn, 2016). The existence of discourses like Trump's evidences the singer's need to denounce xenophobic attitudes.

In "Sinaloa Cowboys" and "Balboa Park," Springsteen presents a different scenario. In this case, rather than an Asian father who is a legal immigrant in the U.S., the singer tells the stories of undocumented Mexican immigrants. The previously mentioned brothers Louis and Miguel that star in "Sinaloa Cowboys" manage to arrive in the Promised Land and find rough jobs: "in the fields of the San Joaquin / [...] They worked side by side in the orchards from morning till the day was through" (Springsteen, 1995). These lines emphasize the harsh reality of immigrants like Louis and Miguel in America and the fact that the Promised Land is far from ideal. Moreover, the song also responds to views like Trump's by highlighting that rather than stealing jobs, they were "doing the work hueros [whites] wouldn't do" (Springsteen, 1995)

However, given their desperation because of the harsh conditions of their job, when the opportunity of making more money arises the brothers take it: "Miguel and Louis stood cooking methamphetamine / You could spend a year in the orchards or make half as much in one ten-hour shift / Working for the men from Sinaloa" (Springsteen, 1995). Even if they ignored the risks this activity entailed ("ah, but if you slipped / The hydriodic acid could burn right through your skin / They'd leave you spitting up blood in the desert if you breathed those fumes in"), their father's warning before their departure will resonate with the listener as a threatening premonition: "[m]y sons one thing you will learn / For everything the north gives, it exacts a price in return" (Springsteen, 1995). The man's voice offers a contrast between the experience that comes with age and makes the father knowledgeable of the reality of the American Dream, and the youthful naivety of his sons. Unfortunately, the brothers decide to disregard their father's warning and to work for the men from Sinaloa, which brings about their misfortune: "[w]hen the shack exploded [...] / Miguel carried Louis's body over his shoulder [...] and there in the tall grass Louis Rosales died" (Springsteen, 1995). And like their father had anticipated, "in the dirt he [Miguel] dug up ten thousand dollars, all that they'd saved / Kissed his brother's lips and placed him in his grave" (Springsteen, 1995). This dramatic ending highlights how the cracks in the American Dream

rarely let its pursuers, in this case the immigrant brothers, win. Although Miguel was able to make more money from the meth lab, he lost his younger brother; as their father said, “for everything the north gives, it exacts a price in return.”

Similarly, “Balboa Park” represents the reality of a group of abandoned immigrant children in San Diego whose expectations regarding the American Dream, like the previous protagonists’, were far from being met. Not only are these children homeless, “[h]e lay his blanket underneath the freeway as the evening sky grew dark,” but also drug addicts, “[t]ook a sniff of toncho from his coke can” whose services “the men in their Mercedes [would] come nightly to employ” (Springsteen, 1995). In the eyes of these immigrant children, their Dreams could only be accomplished by rich people’s taking advantage of their situation: “[h]e did what he had to for the money, sometimes he sent home what he could spare / The rest went to high-top sneakers and toncho and jeans like the gavachos wear” (Springsteen, 1995). In the same way that the father of Louis and Miguel said in “Sinaloa Cowboys,” “for everything the north gives, it exacts a price in return,” the fate of the children in Balboa Park does not invite to optimism: “[o]ne night the border patrol swept Twelfth Street, a big car come fast down the boulevard / Spider stood caught in its headlights, got hit and went down hard” (Springsteen, 1995). Based on the real lives of the children in Balboa Park, Springsteen shares another hardship of the American Dream, the one suffered by immigrant children. Whether it was because their parents decided to prioritize their children having the opportunity to attain the American Dream or because they abandoned them, these minors were left alone and defenseless in a society trying to use them for their own benefit. They are exploited as drug dealers, cheap labor or even abused by people who are fully aware of their situation and still refuse to get them help. Just like the protagonists of the aforementioned immigration songs, the children in “Balboa Park” are denied equal opportunity to fulfill their Dreams.

To conclude, Springsteen’s songs on immigration criticize yet another crack in the American Dream, this one experienced by working-class migrants who see America as the Promised Land where their lives will improve. In order to reach the U.S., these migrants full of hopes and dreams, as Springsteen portrays in “Across the Border,” will have to set out on an arduous journey, which he depicts in “Matamoros Banks” and briefly mentions in “Sinaloa Cowboys,” putting their lives at stake. However, once they arrive in America (if they ever do), they will realize their idealizations are far from factual and find a country where some

American-born citizens will perceive them as threats to their own well-being, as seen in “Galveston Bay.” As a result, as shown in “Sinaloa Cowboys” and “Balboa Park,” immigrants will need to resort to desperate solutions to earn a living and potentially even lose their lives while doing so. Thus, Springsteen shows and criticizes how nationality and immigration status are obstacles for immigrants to pursue their American Dreams.

4. Conclusion

The definition of the American Dream has been commonly based on Truslow’s notions of meritocracy and equal access. However, as I have proved in my analysis, this is far from true. Although the American Dream has been alive for over three centuries, it has never offered the same opportunities to everyone who wants to attain it. Bruce Springsteen’s music allows the study of the hypocrisy behind this notion, which is particularly endured by working-class people in general and more specifically by war veterans, people of color and immigrants.

In his songs about war, Springsteen criticizes the U.S.’s abandonment of its veterans, especially those belonging to the working-class. The cracks in the American Dream suffered by these people started as soon as they got drafted, as they lacked the means others from higher social classes had to avoid being sent to war. This is the first crack in the Dream they would experience, as they did not have the same social connections and financial opportunities to avoid risking their lives in a war many of them wanted nothing to do with. Moreover, provided they returned, they would find a country that would disregard them. Not only did the economic crisis in the 1970s and 80s affect blue-collar America the most, but it also made it almost impossible for returnees to find or recover their jobs. On top of this, their perception as “losers” after one of the U.S.’s most embarrassing defeats in its history made them outcasts in a society that turned a blind eye to them. This bias proves that not everyone would have the same possibilities to succeed by working hard, as many were not even given the chance to work. In addition, many of these returnees would come back deeply troubled psychologically, but their country would once again ignore them instead of providing them with the special care they needed. As a result, many of these veterans would end up unemployed, homeless, or mentally ill, with disorders ranging from PTSD to depression that would sometimes have fatal outcomes. Once again, this shows how the promises made by the American Dream are not necessarily real, as Springsteen criticizes in songs like “Born in the U.S.A.,” “The Wall” and “Youngstown,” among others.

Regarding the situation of people of color in America and the American Dream, Springsteen denounces many of the issues that prevent them from having equal opportunity to realize their Dreams. The singer portrays the environments that may be the root of the problem, as they might have contributed to the biases against people of color. In this sense, we are presented with ghetto-like neighborhoods with high rates of violent deaths, as well as issues with drugs and gangs. Living in this type of neighborhood, sometimes as a result of exclusionary tactics practiced by realtors in middle-class suburbs, takes away many of the means Americans may rely on to achieve their American Dreams. For instance, the best schools are normally located in middle-to-upper-class neighborhoods, and they are the easier way to be accepted into the top colleges. Obtaining a degree from a high-ranking university usually gives access to better-paid jobs, which make achieving one's American Dream easier. Because people of color are often relegated to poorer areas, they are denied equal opportunity to succeed despite their efforts, as well as certain types of medical care that may not be available in their suburbs. Moreover, other practices like racial profiling, in addition to the dangers associated with poorer neighborhoods, are undoubtedly to blame for high mortality rates. Springsteen's critique of the American Dream and the social and racial context of the U.S. is bold in songs such as "American Skin (41 Shots)," "Black Cowboys," "My Hometown" or "Galveston Bay." Not only are minorities typically deprived of an equal chance to succeed, but they are also denied equal opportunity to live. Thus, the situation of racial minorities in America brings yet another crack in the American Dream to the surface.

As for immigration to the U.S., the analysis of Springsteen's songs on this topic uncovers one more crack in the American Dream, that is, the discrimination experienced mainly by Mexican immigrants, in addition to Vietnamese refugees after the Vietnam War. The singer portrays the struggles of all those Mexicans who leave their home and risk their lives in a long and harsh journey in order to reach the Mexican-American border. Once in the U.S., many of these immigrants will discover that they will not find an American Dream. As well as facing discrimination, but they are also perceived as stealers of jobs and welfare. As a result, very few of them are able to get work that will pay enough to sustain themselves and not threaten their lives. Once again, we may rightfully doubt the existence of equality of opportunity to prosper and achieve a better life promised by the American Dream. In Springsteen's songs we can see how many of these immigrants see themselves obliged to

resort to seemingly appealing but life-threatening escapes to their sweat labor jobs. They will find better-paid and less-time-demanding jobs in the world of drugs, ignoring the fact that they are being taken advantage of to carry out incredibly dangerous tasks that may get them killed. Not even immigrant children are viewed as being worth the compassion of those who have the power to improve their lives. In this sense, Springsteen depicts a society in which immigrants are exploited as cheap labor or drug dealers, which often leads them to drug addiction, gangs, violence and even death. The Boss's critique of the American Dream as regards immigration in the U.S. is especially prominent in songs such as "Balboa Park," "Across the Border" and "Galveston Bay." In the lyrics of these songs, neither are defenseless children nor hard working adults deemed worthy of the promises of the American Dream they risked everything for.

Springsteen's music has undoubtedly proved to be a fascinating and insightful way to critically examine the reality behind the myth of the American Dream. His effective storytelling gives a voice to those often disregarded citizens. Besides, his songs accurately portray their hardships and denounce the hypocrisy of a Dream that is actually attainable by only a few. Because of this, the Boss's critiques have been studied by many across a variety of fields, as shown in the bibliographical review carried out in the third section of the theoretical chapter of this dissertation. Particularly remarkable are his depictions of the struggles of blue-collar America, as well as his views on war, race, and immigration as I have aimed to prove in my dissertation. Perhaps the most commonly analyzed Springsteen song is his popular "Born in the U.S.A." due to its portrayal of the Vietnam War and of American patriotism. Nevertheless, as I conducted my research I also came across essays on the singer's representations of the borderlands, crime, violence, prejudice, and working-class identity in the U.S. However, I was rather surprised to find that the cultural relevance of Springsteen's songs has not been studied outside the U.S., let alone Spain, as often as it deserves. Therefore, with "Bruce Springsteen and the Cracks in the American Dream" it has been my intention to contribute to the research that has been done on the Boss's lyrics and to share my findings on the representation of the myth of the American Dream. In addition, I hope that this dissertation will also inspire Spanish authors to consider Springsteen for their cultural studies of the U.S., especially in the context of this myth.

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